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Painless Selection- German Style

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During the past few months, comprehensivisation has been much discussed in Northern Ireland. It has become obvious that there is very sharp disagreement about the whole issue. Teachers who are in favour of comprehensive schools often give as one of their principal reasons their distaste for the selection examination. Their aversion derives much of its force from an emotional involvement with children. Having grown to feel solicitude and affection for their pupils, they experience great concern when examination results imply that some of these children are "failures". The following statement, made by a Northern Ireland secondary school teacher, epitomises their feeling of compassion:

"It is very sad to see young children being sorted into good and bad "piles", and especially streamed into different buildings where the academic 'failures' so obviously feel the stigma throughout their secondary school careers. Segregation at 11 years is basically immoral". *

Of course, objections to the selection testing procedure can be formulated on intellectual as well as on emotional grounds. The examination can create pressures in school which militate against a truly educational process. There are fears that the examination may not always be accurate in assigning the right pupils to the right schools. The very fact that a process of selection exists is believed by some to set up a self-fulfilling prophecy, which prevents many able, but 'rejected', pupils from attaining their potential.

Claims such as these must be taken seriously by educationalists and politicians. However, total rejection of the selection examination does not necessarily imply total acceptance of comprehensivisation. Even those who detest selection may have serious reservations about comprehensive schools. One of the reasons for such reservations is doubt about whether modification of the educational system can ever really change society. Two of the admirable aims of the pro-comprehensive lobby are to achieve increased understanding and cohesion among children of different social classes, and to achieve full equality of opportunity for all pupils, but there is already evidence from other countries (Ford, 1969; Jencks, 1972) that comprehensive education does not help to attain these objectives. A Northern Ireland teacher who shares this scepticism about the social aims of comprehensive schools writes as follows:

"Comprehensive schools seek equality, but will instead reinforce inequality. As a socialist and a radical, I regard them as a disaster; as

*This and the subsequent asterisked quotations are drawn from answers given in a pilot study conducted among teachers in the Spring, 1976.

a member of the working class I regard them as a senseless piece of utopian social engineering, based upon guilt-feelings of a few middle-class intellectuals."*

Doubts about the social (and educational) effectiveness of comprehensive schooling have in fact led some people to conclude that schools are being used as pawns in a political game and that much of the thrust towards comprehensivisation derives from political rather than educational motives. This conviction is fairly forcibly expressed by a Northern Ireland primary teacher:

"I am unconvinced that comprehensivisation is an educational ideal rather than a socialist one. Comprehensives will not solve the problem of selection. This must still take place, though perhaps not as openly as before."*

Quite apart from the political overtones of the proposed reform, the cost of the scheme must give rise to concern. Full realisation of the comprehensive ideal requires more and better learning resources, the training of teachers to deal with mixed-ability groups and some provision of purpose-built accommodation. All of this demands an even more generous education budget than usual, yet at present the budget is actually being cut back. Even if the planned reform is eventually implemented in a satisfactory manner, it is obvious that it will take many years to do so. In the meantime, one or more generations of children will have been sacrificed to educational experimentation. It is impossible not to believe that these children will suffer as a result of the government's inability to finance comprehensive reorganisation properly and as a result of teachers' failure to agree on the desirability of the whole reform. Financial stringency and confusion in the educational system are highly likely to lead to the general levelling down of academic standards which is feared by many, and, if this were to happen, it would represent a failure to capitalise on one of our most precious natural resources - the intelligence of our young people.

Northern Ireland is a province plagued by civil unrest, high inflation and serious unemployment. Yet we are aiming for a total reorganisation of our educational system. It is interesting to note that in West Germany, a much richer country than ours, educationalists feel that total comprehensive reorganisation would be too expensive at present. They have developed a strategy which is intended to take the pain out of selection and establish instead a system of careful guidance and counselling for all pupils. The very existence of such a strategy is significant, since it demonstrates that there is more than one way of resolving an educational dilemma. In

Northern Ireland, there is a tendency to assume the only alternative to an over-rigid and harsh tripartite system is radical reform of the entire system. However, radical reform runs the risk of either bankrupting the country or sacrificing the interests of numerous children. Since both are equally undesirable, it may be worthwhile to examine the West German solution more closely.

In the past, German pupils were selected for various types of secondary school at age 10 - a year earlier than in Northern Ireland. Now, in many parts of the country, they no longer undergo a selection examination. Instead, all children between the ages of 10 and 12 are subjected to a two-year period of observation known as the "Orientierungsstufe". During this time, they are given a degree of concentrated and specialised attention which could only be maintained with extreme difficulty throughout their secondary education. Special training is needed for teachers if the objectives of the "Orientierungsstufe" are to be attained. An intense effort is made to ensure that, as far as possible, all children have equal opportunity to show their worth; this involves attempting to achieve affective as well as cognitive aims. At the end of the two-year period, the children's progress is discussed with parents and, with the latter's agreement, the children are assigned to one of the traditional school-types. Since child, parent and teacher have all been able to monitor the child's performance over a two-year period, it is not difficult to reach such an agreement, and, unlike a selection examination, this produces no shock or surprise because it is not an unexpected "verdict". Nor is it necessarily assumed that a child will remain in the school to which he has first been assigned. If he exceeds or disappoints expectations, he can be transferred to another school-type. This principle of "transferability" (or "Durchlässigkeit") is regarded as extremely important, since it provides a further safeguard against inaccurate allocation to a particular school-type.

West Germany consists of eleven federal districts, each of which is known as a "Land" (plural "Länder"). Each of these Länder has a high degree of autonomy in educational matters, with the result that educational policy is not uniform throughout the country. Hesse, for example, introduced the Orientierungsstufe back in 1960, and Schleswig-Holstein did so in 1971. However, all the Länder are now committed to the scheme, and most have published detailed plans showing how they plan to introduce it. Obviously, it would be tedious and repetitious to go through the proposals of each Land in turn. The purpose will be just as well served by analysing the plans of one Land in detail. Since

Northern Ireland is at the stage of planning comprehensive reorganisation, it seems appropriate to choose a Land which is also at the planning stage, and which can, like Northern Ireland, draw on the previous experience of others. The Saarland intends to introduce the Orientierungsstufe in 1977, and the Ministry of Education of the Saar has published a document (Royle, 1975) outlining the project. The present description of the workings and organisation of the Orientierungsstufe is based upon the Saar Ministry's document.

In a formal sense, the Orientierungsstufe is an independent entity, and is intended to constitute a comprehensive school in miniature. Ideally, it should be located in its own building, though it may also occupy a self-contained section of a secondary school with space to spare. In the latter case, every possible care must be taken that the Orientierungsstufe does not integrate with the host school, since one of the basic aims of the scheme is to ensure that pupils do not identify prematurely with a particular school-type. The staff of the Orientierungsstufe will be drawn from the traditional types of secondary school and will undergo a special programme of in-service training. The whole entity will be presided over by the principal of the host school or, in the case of independent premises, by the principal of neighbouring secondary school. Pupil numbers must be kept as low as is consistent with efficiency; also the necessity of giving every child expert, individual attention calls for a particularly generous staff-pupil ratio. The optimum overall size for an Orientierungsstufe unit has been estimated at about 300.

The Saar ministry document pays meticulous attention to organisation of the Orientierungsstufe curriculum. The components of the curriculum plan are considered under six headings: teaching content, learning objectives, evaluation, work materials, methodology and documentation of the whole experiment.

A major requirement of the curriculum planning process is close cooperation and teamwork among teachers, which is made especially fruitful by the fact that the teachers are drawn from different school-types. Each teacher knows the demands and standards of his own particular school-type, and this means that children are guided and counselled by people with practical experience of the available options. Unlike much career guidance today, guidance in the Orientierungsstufe is not a matter of counselling children to take up options about which the counsellor himself has only a theoretical knowledge.

The very diversity of experience among the staff can, however, give rise to problems in planning teaching content. Various teachers will perform have

different assumptions and premises about content and methodology. These must not be glossed over, as they can help to enrich the curriculum. Rather, they must be made salient by exhaustive discussions among the teachers, and an attempt must be made to reach a consensus. Such discussions will enable teachers to estimate exactly the time required to cover various subject-areas. They will also facilitate coordination and communication between teachers concerned with different subject-groups.

Second in the Saar Ministry's list of curriculum planning components comes the catalogue of learning objectives. It is urged that teachers should arrange their objectives in taxonomic order (Bloom, 1972). This is thought a valuable procedure for several reasons. It indicates, for example, whether the teaching plan is well-balanced. Taxonomic order shows at once whether the curriculum is overloaded with lower-order cognitive objectives, such as acquisition of facts, at the expense of higher-order objectives, such as synthesis and evaluation. By ranking objectives in this way, teachers can see the structure which needs to be built up in the learner's mind, and this assists them with lesson preparation. A comparison of learning objectives for different subjects can also highlight areas where coordinated planning would help the pupils. For example, it has been found that much is gained when teachers of the mother tongue and of foreign languages agree upon a common terminology, so that pupils are not obliged to learn different names for the same grammatical concepts.

The clear specification of learning objectives makes it much easier to accomplish the third task in the German curriculum plan - that of evaluation. This is an area where the experience of teachers can be used to very good effect. Teachers with many years' service behind them usually know exactly how to question a pupil in order to find out whether he has grasped the essential relations between ideas. Such expertise should be capitalised upon in the Orientierungsstufe. The presence on the staff of teachers from different school-types can also be turned to advantage. Teachers from the less academic type of secondary school can make a particularly worthwhile contribution in the matter of evaluation, since they are well aware of the literacy problems experienced by some pupils and can therefore help to formulate questions in such a way that reading comprehension does not constitute a difficulty. The fact that questions are comprehensible to all pupils does not necessarily mean, however, that they elicit answers only at a low conceptual level. For each age-group, there are norms of learning achievement which must be attained before one can speak of learning success after a teaching session. Working towards these

achievement norms automatically ensures a respect for "standards" in the Orientierungsstufe. Colleges of education and research institutes can be of assistance in the setting of such norms, and can also help with the standardising of tests.

Scrupulous fairness in evaluation is always essential, but never more so than in the Orientierungsstufe. The spirit of objectivity should permeate even informal staffroom chat about pupils. The exchange of information between one teacher and another should be specific, rather than general, and should relate to the curriculum and its objectives. The precision of the observations which teachers communicate to one another should enable them to build up a picture of a pupil's strengths and weakness and so be of greater assistance to him.

Discussion and cooperation should extend to such seemingly practical matters as work materials. In the Orientierungsstufe, nothing must be left to chance. Teachers should decide among themselves which media and materials are required for which subjects and, after a reasonable period, should evaluate the efficacy of these teaching aids. Those which prove valuable can be used on a wider scale - perhaps even throughout a whole Land. Documentation on teaching material is available from a number of national centres, and help with reprographic processes is also available at certain centres in each Land. It is obviously felt by the Saar Ministry that the more help teachers receive in this area, the more chance there is that pupils will be given learning materials appropriate for their needs.

The group planning approach is advocated for almost every stage of the Orientierungsstufe's development. Even teaching methodology, the most individualistic element on the whole curriculum plan, is no exception, since it, too, is to be the subject of consultation among teachers. It is reasoned by the Ministry that each child responds better to some teaching strategies than to others and that, to give him a fair chance of doing well, a deliberate effort should be made to vary the social forms of classroom instruction. Group work, pair work, individual study and whole-class teaching should be carefully balanced, so that the child's response to each strategy can be observed. By actually specifying the social form of instruction in the curriculum plan, it should be possible to avoid, say, a poor balance between group discussion and written work. Such specifications may seem restricting for the teacher, but the Saar Ministry deems them essential if the potential of each pupil is to be maximised.

The sixth and final component of the curriculum plan is not to be regarded as the sole responsibility of teachers. The documentation of work in the Orientierungsstufe requires the expertise of outside

agencies, such as universities and research institutes. Such documentation is necessary for the supra-regional planning of the Orientierungsstufe and for the standardisation of achievement norms. A deliberate effort must be made to ensure that pupils are not disadvantaged by the locality in which they happen to live. Standards may be higher in some Orientierungsstufen than in others, and only expert help can balance this factor out and promote true equality of opportunity. Teachers can assist the process by providing information and contributing towards the accumulation of collective pedagogical experience.

However, if there is indeed to be true equality of opportunity, it is useless to concentrate exclusively on cognitive objectives. Performance in the cognitive domain is very closely linked with developments in the affective domain, and the Saar Ministry considers that children can only attain their full potential if teachers pay sufficient attention to this latter aspect. Of course, even with such attention, some children are still insufficiently motivated. The Ministry document is unusual in that it devotes more space to the socio-emotional objectives of the Orientierungsstufe than to the cognitive ones. Curriculum developers usually tend to avoid the whole question of affective development, one reason being, presumably, the extreme difficulty of measuring it. It is also difficult to ascertain the relationship between the teacher's action and its effect on the pupil. The teacher knows with a fair degree of certainty what he must do to attain certain intellectual goals with his pupils, but is often non-plussed when it comes to deciding what he must do to bring about certain emotional dispositions and attitudes. Notwithstanding all the difficulties, the Saar Ministry has made an attempt to tackle the problem of affective development in the Orientierungsstufe. It tries to offer teachers a conceptual framework for the assessment of pupil behaviour and also makes some practical suggestions about ways of promoting socio-emotional objectives.

The basic premise of this whole approach to classroom management is that teachers must make a conscious attempt to iron out deficits in learning drive by promoting good social relations between pupils. It is not enough to hope that good social adjustment will miraculously develop if one lumps together children from different social strata. The social horizon of each child must be considered and, if it is narrow, an attempt must be made to widen it. The study of the mother tongue (in this case, of course German) has a special contribution to make in enlarging the pupils' social perspectives. The existence of different registers and codes should be explained to them, and they should learn to share the respect which experts in linguistics have for *all* forms of human

communication. Middle-class children may have narrow social horizons in the sense that they know very little about the everyday life of the working class. The teacher should try to make the more privileged children aware of the difficulties faced by some working-class children (e.g. no quiet place to do homework), and should try to make all pupils feel that they belong to the same social entity. Taxonomic ranking may prove useful in the field of social learning, just as it did in the domain of intellectual learning. The teacher can take comfort in the fact that progress begins with simple psycho-motor actions, and proceeds from these small beginnings to attitude change. The child may be encouraged towards better social adjustment if he is persuaded, for example, to take such a simple action as going to a group. The next step may be that of learning to accept an offer of cooperation. This is usually a preliminary to learning to make such an offer. The child will gradually learn different social roles and, at a more advanced stage, when he has already learned much about group norms, he will help to bring about socio-cultural innovations.

This vignette of social development is offered tentatively by the Saar Ministry; the document's whole discussion of ways in which teachers can aid the affective development of their pupils may sound utopian, but it has the merit of facing up to the problems and making an attempt to cope with them. Most educational planners seem content to set up the circumstances in which they hope that social integration will take place; chance and good luck are relied upon to do the rest. The suggestions made by the Saar Ministry highlight the idea that there are different levels of social development, and sensitise teachers to their role in assisting the emotional development of pupils. It is easy enough to be critical of these proposals, but rather less easy to be constructive.

The pupil's social relations in the *Orientierungsstufe* are not, of course, the only determinant of achievement. His self-concept plays a vital role in determining his level of aspiration. Teachers can help him to gain some insight into this self-concept, and can familiarise him with the idea of self-determination. Children should always be discouraged from attributing failure to a lack of ability. They must be helped, on the contrary, to see that hard work, the easiness or difficulty of an exercise and even good luck all play a part in success. Fatalistic attitudes must be combatted, and achievement orientation cultivated instead. Some of the methods employed by McClelland (1961) might profitably be used to bring this about. Pupils can be gently introduced to the idea of setting goals for themselves and attaining these goals; this may be

done first as a game and then extended to more serious matters. Fairy stories and fantasy can be useful aids in presenting the concept of achievement orientation to children, but gradually the pupils should be taught to distinguish between actions directed by the individual himself and those directed by others. This notion is basic to the child's idea of self-determination, on which the realisation of his full potential depends.

Any attempt to promote achievement orientation without taking account of parents and home is inevitably doomed to failure. For this reason, the Saar Ministry devotes part of its document to the relationship between home and school. Since teachers are not directly involved in parent-child interaction, their liaison with the home is necessarily defined in formalistic, rather than in personal terms. The best that they can do is to try and ensure that parents' contacts with the school are as satisfying as possible. To this end, a particular teacher in each *Orientierungsstufe* is to assume special responsibility for parent-school relations and, in order to emphasize the importance of the task, he will receive extra pay. All teachers will be requested to draw up reports on parents' evenings, and the teacher who is responsible for home-school liaison will use these to develop a model for parent counselling. He will also ensure that, if any information asked for by parents is not immediately available, it will be provided as soon after the parents' evening as possible. Where contact with parents is minimal, it is proposed to improve it by enlisting the services of community social workers, who often have a more direct relationship with such families. Social workers can also help to show parents the advantages which schooling can offer their children. Even a very simple action, such as persuading them that money spent on writing materials is money well spent, can have a beneficial effect on their child's school career.

A sincere and vigorous attempt to offer children equality of opportunity has implications for every aspect of the educational system. In particular, it has implications for the role of the teacher. Throughout the Saar Ministry's document it is tacitly assumed that teachers will follow the official policy, and that they will implement the Ministry's plans in as conscientious and wholehearted a manner as possible. The convictions and dispositions of individual teachers must not be allowed to jeopardise the attempt to achieve equal opportunity for pupils. Teachers must all work together for the good of the children, even to the point of sacrificing their own idiosyncrasies. The Saar document foresees some resistance to this demand, and makes an effort to forestall possible objections. It is argued that teachers must get used to exercising their autonomy in a

manner different from that to which they have been accustomed. Their scope for initiative in the class room may well be limited by the obligation to keep learning objectives in view and to try to attain them within the desired time, but it is hoped that they will feel compensated for this constraint by their increased freedom to participate in educational planning. Teachers are not to be reduced to mere executors of ministerial directives. They are to be given the right to help frame decisions on curriculum, learning objectives, achievement norms, syllabus and teaching methods, responsibilities which may well confer upon them a new dignity and foster a new sophistication. However, once communal consensus has been reached by the teaching team, the individual teacher has little right to deviate from the decisions of the group although he will have helped to form the structure within which he works by his contribution at the team-planning stage. Once the plane has evolved, it must be adhered to by all teachers. The whole Orientierungsstufe can, in fact, be regarded as a kind of human laboratory, where the pupils and their performance are the dependent variables, while the teachers, the curriculum and the teaching methods are independent variables. Only in a laboratory-type situation like this, can the child's pedagogic environment be systematically varied, thus illuminating the factors which make for positive reactions and successful learning. Such an objective implies greater observability of the teaching situation than heretofore. It also implies a certain uniformity and consistency of teaching procedure. This may at first be unpalatable to some teachers, but it is necessary in the interests of equality of opportunity for the children. It is, of course, impossible to ensure absolute equality, but it ought to be possible to minimise the imponderables in human communication. This means that teachers will have to give their primary affiliation to objectives which they themselves have decided in group-consultation. It also means that they may have to curb in themselves certain tendencies which might jeopardise the attainment of group objectives, for example, a tendency to wander off the point or to concentrate unduly on aspects of the syllabus which are of particular personal interest. It would seem, regrettably perhaps, that no genuine attempt to be fair to the children is compatible with a completely laissez-faire policy for teachers.

Although the Orientierungsstufe might well be perceived as a threat by teachers, in practice this does not appear to be so. It offers the possibility of controlled change; if it were to fail, this would lead to crisis in only a part of the educational system. It is, in fact, believed to have far less potential for disaster than any attempt to reform the system as a whole.

Since the dangers of the Orientierungsstufe are minimal, and its objectives worthy, it commands the loyalty and commitment of many teachers. Parents naturally prefer a two-year guidance period to an examination for their children; they recognise the Orientierungsstufe as a genuine attempt to promote social justice without endangering their children's future, and are therefore unlikely to sabotage implementation of the scheme. Offering, as it does, the prospect of progress with minimum conflict among the interested parties, a Northern Ireland equivalent of the Orientierungsstufe might well be worth considering as a way of escaping from a rigorous selection examination without necessarily facing the turmoil of total comprehensive reorganisation.

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